

Misrated Meanings: A Multimodal Semiotic Critique of Age Classification in Streaming Animation

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ABSTRACT: The globally increase of streaming media has changed not only the circulation of animation but also the structures through which this media content is categorized and controlled. This research critically studies the semiotic boundaries of age classification contexts practical to animated content on platforms like Netflix, arguing that existing age rating is rely unreasonably on superficial-level elements while ignoring the multimodal complexity of making meaning. Based on a qualitative multimodal content analysis of selected animation, K-pop-inspired demon-hunter narratives, this research examines how visual signs, sound design, narrative, and affective intensity interact to produce meanings that exceed their given ‘child-friendly’ category. This research shows that animation has bright color palettes, musical performance, and stylized character design is often considered as suitable for younger children without considering the presence of semiotically dense elements such as demonic symbolism, identity fragmentation, and emotionally intense transformation sequences. The results recommend that existing rating systems inadequately account for the affective and symbolic dimensions of media, particularly in hybrid forms that combine entertainment aesthetics with complex thematic content.

KEYWORDS: Age classification, Animation, Multimodal semiotics, Media regulation, Streaming platforms.

INTRODUCTION

The fast growth of global streaming platforms has essentially redesigned how audiovisual media are produced, distributed, and characterized. Streaming platforms such as Netflix, now function as distributors and classificatory authorities, conveying age ratings that classify audience access and expectations. While these classifications are frequently presented as unbiased tools for content instruction, recently scholars recommends that platform-based classification is deeply embedded in algorithmic logics, and simplified content metrics (Bucher, 2022; Carah & Shaul, 2023). In this situation, animations occupy a particular ambiguous position, as it continues to be culturally associated with childhood despite increasingly complex thematic and aesthetic developments.

Based on the researches on streaming culture, classification structures are formed by data-driven processes that arrange efficiency and scalability over interpretive content (Du, 2025; Miao et al., 2025). These systems naturally depend on quantifiable indicators, like the presence of violence, unappropriated language, or explicit content. Without considering and overseeing how meaning is constructed across multiple semiotic modes. Consequently, animated content that lack overtly ‘adult’ signs may be considered as suitable for younger audiences, even they contain dense symbolic structures, affective intensity, or psychologically complex narratives.

meanwhile, expansions in digital media and virtual performance precisely in K-pop and transmedia animation, more complex traditional boundaries between child-oriented and adult-oriented content. Hybrid methods that mixed musical performance, animated avatars, and supernatural or “demonic” narratives produce hidden meanings that cannot be sufficiently captured through conventional rating criteria. Researches on virtual idols and digital embodiment highlights how such media operate through fragmented identities, affective engagement, and multimodal sign systems that extend beyond visual appearance alone (Ahn et al., 2025; Ringrose, 2024). Yet, these perceptions have not yet been scientifically applied to the study of age classification in animation content.

Also, the researches in feminist media studies and AI-generated visual culture also argue to the persistence of ideological forms within digital environments, especially in connection to gender representation and aesthetic coding (Li, 2024; Diwanji, 2026). Nonetheless, these studies show how digital media reproduce and transform normalized cultural, they do not express how such complexities are interpreted or misinterpreted in institutional contexts of content regulation. Likewise, researchers on digital



intimacy and audience engagement stresses the emotional and affective dimensions of virtual media (Onishi et al., 2024; Zhang & Kim, 2026), so far, age rating structures continue to privilege surface-level forms over experiential impact.

Despite all the researches regarding streaming platforms, algorithmic culture, and virtual media, there is still lack of research investigate on how age classification systems involve with the multimodal construction of meaning in animation. especially, the interaction between visual, auditory, and narrative elements and their role in shaping affective experience has been largely absent in media studies. This study examines this gap by applying a multimodal semiotic approach to analyze how animations are classified and how these classifications may obscure or misrepresent their interpretive complexity.

By investigating on selected cases, K-pop-inspired demon-hunter narratives, from streaming animation, this research argues that current age classification structures are not simply not sufficient but fundamentally limited in their ability to account for hybrid and multimodal media. For doing so, it contributes to initial debates in media studies, semiotics, and digital culture by proposing a more detail understanding of how meaning, affect, and audience are constructed in the streaming time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The categorization of visual media has been understood as a monitoring tool intended to protect audiences, especially children, from harmful and inappropriate content. Nevertheless, the shift from broadcast to platform distribution media has essentially changed how such categorization is produced, applied, and experienced. Recently, scholars in media and platform governance underlines that streaming services now applies not only as distributors but also as regulatory actors, effectually assuming roles once held by national classification boards (Napoli, 2023; Flew et al., 2022).

This change increased the concern about the transparency and consistency of age rating systems in digital environments. Unlike traditional controlling frameworks, which operate through clearly defined criteria and institutional oversight, platform-based classification is often embedded within opaque systems shaped by algorithmic processes, commercial imperatives, and global scalability (Gillespie, 2023; Suzor, 2023). Consequently, age categories are frequently standardized across diverse cultural contexts, raising questions about their adequacy in addressing localized meanings and audience sensitivities. Researches of streaming distribution emphasizes on how platforms such as Netflix categorize such content within simplified genre and age, often privileging visual cues over thematic depth (Lobato, 2022; Johnson, 2024).

Meanwhile, some analysis on digital media and virtual performance has verified that meaning in current audiovisual content is formed through multimodal interaction, where visual, auditory, and narrative signs combine to generate complex affective experiences (Onishi et al., 2024; Ringrose, 2024). These point of views challenges traditional content classification models, which tend to separate discrete elements such as violence or language and ignoring how these elements functions together within a broader semiotic system.

This article focuses on this gap by suggesting a multimodal semiotic approach to criticize the age classification in streaming animation. It argues that existing systems work through a form of visual bias, in which aesthetic surface features like, color, style, and format, are used as first indicators of audience suitability, while deeper symbolic and affective dimensions are overlooked. By examining selected cases of animation, K-pop-inspired demon-hunter narratives, this article tries to determine that misclassification is not incidental but structurally embedded within modern platform-based rating practices.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on qualitative multimodal critical analysis to analyze how age classification systems on streaming platforms interpret and categorize animation. The methodology used multimodal semiotic analysis with critical platform and policy analysis to analyze the gap between assigned age ratings and the underlying semiotic complexity of animation content.

Research Design

The article employs a comparative case study design, focusing K-pop demon hunter distributed via Netflix that are labeled as suitable for younger audiences (+10) but has complex thematic or affective elements. The study compares:

Platform classification (age rating and descriptors)

Actual multimodal content (semiotic analysis)

This two-layer approach allows a critical evaluation of how meaning is reduced, simplified, or overlooked within classification systems.



Corpus Selection

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select K Pop Demond Hunters because, first of all, it is available on streaming platform (Netflix), second of all classified as suitable for children (+10), also it contains supernatural or demonic elements, identity fragmentation or duality, high affective intensity (transformation, conflict), and hybrid aesthetics (music + animation + narrative)

Units of Analysis

The first unit of analysis is the scene, defined as a continuous sequence of visual and narrative coherence. Each selected text is segmented into scenes based on, changes in setting, character configuration, and narrative action. This results in a 40 dataset.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis for this research is conducted in three stages:

Stage 1: Platform Analysis (The text is first analyzed at the platform level, verifying how it is categorized, labeled, and presented to audiences).

Stage 2: Multimodal Coding (Scenes are coded using the semiotic approach to identify patterns of meaning across visual, auditory, and narrative modes).

Stage 3: Critical Interpretation (Findings are interpreted through the lens of platform governance and semiotics, focusing on how classification systems privilege certain types of signs (visual aesthetics) while ignoring others (affective intensity or symbolic depth).

Analytical Concepts

Two key analytical concepts guide the interpretation:

Visual Bias: the prioritization of surface-level visual cues (color, style) in classification decisions.

Semiotic Reduction: the simplification of complex multimodal meanings into limited content descriptors.

FINDINGS

The findings show a consistent misalignment between platform-based age categorization and the multimodal semiotic complexity of the animation. Across the sampled text on Netflix, four main patterns of misclassification emerged: (1) visual bias in age labeling, (2) semiotic reduction of complex themes, (3) the systematic underestimation of affective intensity, and (4) misclassification of hybrid media forms.

1. Visual Bias in Age Classification

A dominant pattern across the dataset is the reliance on visual aesthetics, especially color palette, character design, and animation style, as primary indicators of audience suitability. Texts featuring bright colors, stylized characters, and musical elements were consistently categorized within lower age brackets, regardless of their thematic or narrative complexity.

Coding results show that the text classified as child-appropriate contained high levels of symbolic or narrative complexity, including identity fragmentation, internal conflict, and supernatural antagonism. This suggests that classification systems privilege surface-level visual cues over deeper semiotic structures, reinforcing a persistent cultural assumption that animation is inherently child-oriented.

2. Semiotic Reduction Through Content Descriptors

Platform-provided content descriptors (supernatural musical-action-comedy) were found to significantly underrepresent the interpretive depth of the analyzed texts. While such descriptors accurately identify isolated elements (action), they fail to capture how meaning is constructed through the interaction of multiple modes.

For instance, scenes relating transformation or confrontation with demonic entities were typically labeled as 'fantasy violence,' despite incorporating layered symbolic meanings related to identity division, emotional excess, and internal struggle. This indicates a process of semiotic reduction, where complex multimodal meanings are simplified into discrete, decontextualized categories.

3. Underestimation of Affective Intensity

The analysis further reveals that affective intensity, produced through the combination of music, pacing, visual effects, and narrative tension, is largely absent from classification criteria. Scenes coded as high in affective intensity (e.g., rapid transformations, dramatic confrontations, sensory overload) were frequently included in content rated for younger audiences.



For example, K-pop-inspired demon-hunter narratives demonstrate how synchronized audiovisual elements amplify emotional impact. High-energy music, rapid editing, and visually intense sequences create immersive experiences that may exceed the cognitive or emotional processing capacities assumed by assigned age categories.

4. Misclassification of Hybrid Media Forms

Another key finding is the difficulty classification systems face in addressing hybrid media forms that combine multiple genres and formats. Texts that integrate musical performance, animation, and supernatural storytelling do not fit neatly within existing rating frameworks.

As an outcome, classification tends to default to dominant surface features, such as music or animation, while neglecting underlying narrative and symbolic complexity. This leads to inconsistent and often inadequate categorization, particularly in transnational media forms influenced by industries such as K-pop.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that age classification on streaming platforms is shaped by a systematic prioritization of visual simplicity and categorical efficiency over multimodal interpretive depth. Misclassification is not incidental but emerges from structural limitations in how content is evaluated, described, and categorized.

DISCUSSION

The data analysis of this research provides critical insight into the limitations of current age classification systems within platform-based media environments. By see-through patterns of visual bias, semiotic reduction, and affective oversight, the data analysis tests the assumption that existing rating system can adequately account for the complexity of modern animated content.

1. Rethinking Classification in the Platform Era

To rely on simple forms and visual signs mirrors wider transformations in media governance, where platforms like Netflix function as both distributors and regulators. As previous researches have shown, platform governance prioritizes scalability, standardization, and algorithmic efficiency (Napoli, 2023; Gillespie, 2023). In this context, classification structures are designed to function fast and reliably across volumes of content, regularly at the expense of interpretive nuance.

This article expands these perceptions by demonstrating the structural constraints produce systematic blind spots in the evaluation of multimodal meaning. Age classification becomes less a reflection of content complexity and more a product of operational logic.

2. The Limits of Content-Based Rating Models

previous classification form is rooted in a content-based approach by focusing on the presence or even absence of specific signs such as violence, language, or sexuality. Nevertheless, the findings of this research suggest that this model is insufficient for analyzing hybrid and multimodal media forms.

By detaching individual signs, classification systems fail to account for how meaning emerges through their interaction. For instance, 'fantasy violence' might be treated as inherently less harmful than realistic violence, but when combined with intense audiovisual design and symbolic depth, its impact may be significantly amplified. This shows the need to move beyond additive models of classification toward frameworks that consider 'relational and contextual meaning-making'.

3. Visual Bias and the Cultural Construction of Childhood

The concept of visual bias in this article points to a deeper cultural issue: the ongoing association of animation with childhood. Despite the diversification of animation, classification systems continue to rely on aesthetic markers as proxies for audience suitability.

This bias in classification, not only misrepresents the complication of modern animation but also reinforces outdated assumptions about children's media consumption. It proposes that what is being protected is not necessarily the children, but a culturally constructed notion of what animation 'should' represent.

4. Affective Intensity and the Missing Dimension of Experience

While existing systems measure media, content based on visible elements, the classification system ignore how that content is experienced. The findings of this research demonstrate that affective intensity produced through multimodal interaction, plays a vital role in shaping audience engagement. Without accounting for this concept, classification systems risk underestimating the emotional and psychological effect of media, particularly in immersive and high-intensity animated forms.



5. Toward a Multimodal Framework for Classification

By showing and discussing these limitations, this research argues for a reconceptualization of age classification systems through a multimodal semiotic framework. This approach can reflect not only what content is present but also how it functions across visual, auditory, and narrative modes to produce meaning and affect.

This does not imply abandoning existing criteria but expanding them to include relational, symbolic, and experiential dimensions. By doing so, classification systems could better reflect the complexity of contemporary media and provide more accurate guidance for audiences.

CONCLUSION

This research, critically studied the limitations of age classification structures in the context of streaming animation, showing that current frameworks are not sufficient for capturing the multimodal complexity of current media. The findings of this research reveal that the classification practices are shaped by systematic tendencies toward visual bias, semiotic reduction, and the ignore of affective intensity.

The data analysis shows that K Pop Demond Hunter animation characterized by hybrid aesthetics that combining music, digital imagery, and supernatural narratives that categorized as suitable for younger audiences (10+) despite containing layered symbolic meanings and emotionally intense sequences. This misalignment is not incidental but reflects structural constraints within platform-based classification systems, which prioritize efficiency, standardization, and surface-level indicators over interpretive depth.

Theoretically, this study contributes to media and semiotic scholarship by introducing a multimodal critique of age classification, arguing that meaning in contemporary animation cannot be adequately assessed through isolated content markers. Instead, it must be understood as a relational process emerging from the interaction of visual, auditory, and narrative modes. The concept of visual bias, developed in this study, highlights how aesthetic assumptions continue to shape institutional judgments about audience suitability, reinforcing outdated associations between animation and childhood.

From a regulatory perspective, the findings underscore the need to rethink age classification models in the streaming era. As platforms increasingly assume the role of cultural gatekeepers, more nuanced and context-sensitive approaches are required—ones that account for symbolic complexity and affective experience alongside traditional content criteria.

This study is limited by its focus on a specific sample of streaming content and does not incorporate audience reception or cross-cultural variation in interpretation. Future research could expand this work by examining how viewers themselves perceive and respond to such classifications, as well as by comparing regulatory frameworks across different regions and platforms.

In conclusion, the misclassification of animated content reveals a broader challenge for media regulation in the digital age: the need to move beyond reductive models of evaluation toward frameworks capable of engaging with the full semiotic and experiential dimensions of contemporary media. As animation continues to evolve as a global and hybrid form, so too must the systems that seek to define its audiences.

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